

# “It is written...” by Marjory Bankson

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## The First Sunday in Lent

Ash Wednesday this week marked the beginning of Lent, and 22 of us gathered here for quiet worship—to have our foreheads marked with ashes and the words, “From dust we were made and to dust we shall return.” For those of us who didn’t grow up in a liturgical church, Lent is the period of forty weekdays before Easter. Traditionally, Lent is a time of inner examination, penance and some form of fasting. In the church calendar, Lent recalls the forty years that Moses and his people spent wandering in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land and it recalls the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness between his baptism in the river Jordan and the beginning of his public ministry. Both were times of preparation, of shaping and questioning, of deepening their direct experience of God.

Why doesn’t Lent include the six Sundays before Easter? Because in the ancient church calendar, Sabbath always celebrates the resurrection. Even if Lent was traditionally a

time of penance and sacrifice, Sundays remind us that Jesus' crucifixion is not the end of the story. "From dust he was made, and to dust he returned." God's creation story continues in and through the Risen Christ, among us here and now. So, on this first Sunday of Lent, we read the story in Matthew of how the Spirit led Jesus into the desert, to be tempted by the devil. That tells us that this forty-day period has a holy purpose. There's something important about this contest between Jesus and Satan. Matthew's saying "Listen up!"

Modern readers might be tempted to dismiss this story because they don't believe in Satan. They reject the dualistic notion which dominated the ancient world that we are caught in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil. Contemporary culture avoids talk of sin and sinfulness. Some of us in this room even have trouble with confession, because we want to dwell in the land of grace and forgiveness, not sin and salvation. But the story of Jesus and his temptations may give us a way to reclaim the importance of confronting evil and calling it by name, even though we reject the simplistic notion of dividing people and things into categories called "good" and "evil."

Let's begin with the first temptation. After forty days without food, Jesus was famished, starving even. "IF you are the Son of God," Satan says, "turn these stones into bread." That is, prove your miraculous powers. Demonstrate your specialness – and feed yourself in the process. You don't need to suffer physical hunger. Satan's if-then proposition is an invitation to a game of "show me." Why, after all, would God be testing you this way? It sounds a little like the Genesis story of Adam and Eve in the Garden that we heard in the first reading, doesn't it.

Henri Nouwen, in his fine little book titled "In the Name of Jesus," calls this the temptation to relevance – proving our worth by doing good deeds, being competent, finding solutions. Who wouldn't want to relieve hunger? Or illness? Or suffering? Who wouldn't want to feed the starving people of Sudan or Guatemala? To help the refugees streaming across the borders of Libya? If we had the power to feed 5,000 hungry people on a hillside, wouldn't we do it—as Jesus did later in his ministry.

But in this situation, Jesus answers, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by the word of God.'" And what is that word of God? In the preceding story of Jesus' baptism, Matthew told us the word of God: "You are my beloved." And isn't that what we long to hear, maybe more than bread? Think of those who have bread, but not love? Those brutalized in prison or on our streets. Jesus steps away from Satan's "show me" game.

In all three of these temptations, Matthew frames Jesus' response with the words, "It is written..." At a time of weakness and vulnerability, Jesus draws on his own religious tradition, on the Torah and God's covenant promise: "I will be your God and you will be my people." His answer to the first temptation points to the power of an invisible realm beyond our physical bodies, the realm of love and respect. Indeed, it is that spiritual realm that we claim here, together, in worship today. Ultimately, Jesus says, "It's not about me. It's about God."

The second temptation again concerns Jesus' body. This time,

Satan takes him to the highest pinnacle of the temple and invites Jesus to throw himself down – because, he says, IF you are the Son of God, the angels will catch you up. They will not let you die.

Jesus answers with another “It is written” reply: “Do not tempt God.” In other words, Jesus claims his human body and his mortality, as though to say “Death is a natural part of God’s realm.” Jesus does not take up the challenge to prove he is the son of God by calling in angels to save him – but I think we sometimes do.

Henri Nouwen calls this the temptation to “be spectacular.” But I think it’s more about denying our mortality, denying the limits of physical life. And I see this temptation spread all over ads on TV. Ads imply that you don’t have to suffer asthma, flu, incontinence, hardening arteries or a variety of other physical ailments. You don’t have to change your habits. Simply take a pill instead. Tire ads imply we can avoid rainslick roads or mudslides at midnight. Popular culture implies that Americans shouldn’t have to suffer. We hide the dying away in hospitals, spending enormous sums to stave off death instead of recognizing when the end has come. Since most Americans don’t believe in heaven or hell anymore, I think we try to claim immortality right here.

We are appropriately horrified by the pictures of devastation in Japan right now, and I’ve already heard two people say “How could God let something like this happen?” But as we listen to Jesus respond to this second temptation, we hear that death is part of God’s story, and that learning to live with the reality of death and disease and diminishment is part of our spiritual journey. In this temptation, we hear the distant

echo of the crucifixion coming.

Just yesterday, Peter and I went to a memorial service for a man who faced into this temptation with his eyes wide open. He died of pancreatic cancer, but less than 3 weeks before his death, I sat next to him at another worship service. He was making notes on a paraphrased version of Psalm 23 as we waited for things to begin. He asked me what I was doing these days, and when I told him about my unfired burial urns, he immediately said "I'd like to order one for myself. It won't be long now." And when his wife called a week ago, to tell me that Charlie had died and she did, indeed, want one of my urns, I was shocked! A month ago, he was so full of life. He had given me one of his paintings, left over from a show, saying "You know, I've fallen in love with color this past year. Now I'm learning to die. I've never done that before, you know." And he laughed heartily while taking my picture with his painting.

At the service yesterday, we heard stories about Charlie's stance in life as a learner and a spiritual seeker. But we also got a glimpse of how he was shaped by suffering. The pastor held up a booklet by a Jungian Quaker which Charlie had underlined thoroughly. In purple marker, dated 2.11 (last month), he had written: "Suffering transforms. Suffering transforms. Transform my suffering!"

Indeed, he lived that transformation before our very eyes.

The third temptation may be the most common and the most insidious. Satan takes Jesus up on a high mountain and shows him the kingdoms of the earth. "All these can be yours," he says, "if you will only worship me." In other words, Satan has power to grant over the political and economic systems of the world.

Jesus didn't argue about whether Satan had the power he claimed. Instead, he reacted most strongly to this temptation. "Get away from me!" he says, as though this temptation might be the most attractive. And rightly so.

Nouwen calls this the temptation to exert power over others. It is a drama that we watch endlessly in cartoons and cop shows, sports and celebrity exposes. We also hear the temptation to power in the outcry against "big government" or tax-and-spend policies, in talk of the "war on terrorism" and even the "war on cancer. When we reject the spiritual realm, we tend to demonize people and institutions in our public life.

It's not hard to see evil intent or at least intentional blindness when we see global corporations exploit natural resources and destroy native cultures in the pursuit of profit— that we ourselves demand as consumers and investors. Those of us in David Hilfiker's class in the School of Christian Living are reading about the American appetite for consumption that seems almost demonic to me — too complex to even comprehend, let alone channel or control.

But we don't have to belong to a big organization in order to exert power over others. In fact, you have given me power to speak while you listen right here, right now. I am in a position of control, which could be misused if you were more passive or conditioned. But in this community, we have a strong suspicion of authority and we have intentionally limited institutional power by having a different preacher each week. The spiritual issue here is love and trust. I believe that each person who stands here on a Sunday morning makes an effort to seek the face of God as we grapple with the

text and the social or political context that we share.

The key, for Jesus, was to identify the subject of his worship. Rather than debate whether Satan had the right to offer power over the kingdoms of the world, Jesus simply offered his loyalty to God. To worship God was to embrace a larger story than the quid-pro-quo exchange that the devil offered.

Today, after worship, we have a chance to exercise another kind of power in this community. We will be meeting to approve various amounts of money requested from the Seekers budget for international giving. The guidelines for those requests begin with personal involvement – we don't give money where there is no physical investment of time and energy as well. As followers of Jesus, we know that physical and spiritual matters are entwined like DNA.

The temptation in our culture is to throw money at a problem and hope that somebody will care enough to do the right thing on the ground. The practice here at Seekers is to let those decisions about money be part of our spiritual formation. I hope you will stay to be part of it – the process is open to all.

I'd like to leave you with one last observation about the temptations. Jesus recognized the face of Satan when these temptations came to him. He did not engage on Satan's terms, nor did he try to overcome or destroy Satan. Although Matthew says simply that "Satan departed" at the end, Luke's version of this text adds that "Satan departed until another time."

Our culture says "Stamp out terrorism" or "Eliminate the opposition." Jesus invites us into the struggle with evil because it is essential for spiritual maturity.

We can imagine that Jesus, famished after forty days without food, was weak with hunger and low on personal willpower. With each temptation, he began his response with the words, "It is written," to draw on the power of earlier believers, to call in the strength of his religious tradition. I know there have been times in my own life when I did not have the willpower to confront evil directly. All I could do was to turn my face toward God instead of letting worry or fear become the fulcrum for my being. The good news is that we don't have to do it alone, for "It is written..." that others have gone before us. May we be such a community for each other.

Welcome to Lent. Amen.

Amen.